

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ARRIVAL OF SIR CHARLES MONRO

DURING the fortnight which elapsed between Sir Charles Oct. Monro's appointment and his arrival at the Dardanelles, events in the Balkan theatre moved rapidly. Bulgaria declared war on Serbia on the 14th October, and on the 23rd Bulgarian forces cut the Salonika—Nish railway. It was now more clear than ever that Serbia could not be saved, and the General Staff in England were redoubling their efforts to prevent the despatch of more British troops to Salonika. The Government, in pursuance of their decision to send out "an adequate force" to Egypt without prejudice to its eventual destination, had now fixed the strength of that force at six British divisions, and Sir John French had received orders before the 17th October to prepare the 27th and 28th Divisions for embarkation, these to be followed by four others as soon as four New Army divisions reached France from England.¹ Ministers were now as anxious as the General Staff that these troops should not be sent to Salonika. They were adhering, however, to the opinion that the final destination of the force should not be settled till Monro had made his report.

At this juncture, on the 25th October, Lord Kitchener informed the Dardanelles Committee that the French were urging that all six British divisions from France should be sent not to Egypt but direct to Salonika, "to prevent the destruction of the Serbian army". The French were apparently anxious that all the British troops in Gallipoli should also be sent to the Serbian theatre, and that the British contingent in that theatre should be brought up to 250,000 men. In these circumstances, as the French still apparently believed that Serbia could be saved, it was decided to discuss the matter with General Joffre.

Joffre travelled to London, and a conference was held on

¹ Sir J. French had also received orders to prepare the two Indian divisions to leave France; but these were now to be sent to Mesopotamia to assist in the advance on Baghdad.

Oct. the 29th October.¹ The French Commander-in-Chief urged that if England could not send 250,000 men to Salonika she should at least send 150,000; and he expressed the hope that Serbia could be saved from destruction and Greece persuaded or coerced to come in on the side of the Allies. The British members of the conference were disinclined to agree, but Joffre finally led them to believe that a British refusal to co-operate might entail his resignation and even the rupture of the Entente.² Next morning a written promise was given to Joffre that the British Government would co-operate energetically with the French on the understanding that if communication with the Serbian army could not be opened up and maintained, the Allied forces would be withdrawn.

By this agreement the possibility of sending more troops to the Dardanelles was seriously prejudiced even before the arrival of Sir Charles Monro's report. The problem was now further complicated by a new and powerfully argued proposal for saving the situation in Gallipoli by another naval attempt to force the Straits.

Ever since August Commodore Roger Keyes, Chief of Staff to Admiral de Robeck, had been pressing the admiral to come to the army's aid by attempting to rush the Straits. The admiral had appointed a committee to consider the proposal; but the committee had not met, and in September the question had been temporarily shelved by the proposals for a French landing on the Asiatic shore. But on the 23rd September Keyes had submitted to the admiral a scheme drawn up by Major W. W. Godfrey, R.M.L.I. (de Robeck's War Staff officer), and on the 17th October, when the news from the Balkans showed that nothing could now stop the arrival of German munitions at Constantinople, he again returned to the charge. He urged that a combined naval and military attack (in the course of which one squadron would rush the Straits and engage the Narrows forts in reverse, while other squadrons would engage them from below the Kephez minefield and from the western side of the peninsula) was the only way to save the situation. He was certain that

¹ Present : The Prime Minister, Lord Kitchener, Mr. A. J. Balfour, General Sir Wm. Robertson (representing Sir J. French), Admiral Sir H. B. Jackson, Vice-Admiral D. A. Gamble, General Joffre, Colonel Pont.

² Joffre's insistence was probably due partly to a wish for a success in the East to counteract the unpopularity of his recent heavy losses in Champagne; partly to his anxiety to save the French Government, which was at that moment being assailed for failing to help Serbia. Nevertheless, by the time he returned to Paris the Government had already fallen. M. Briand had become Prime Minister, with General Gallieni as Minister of War, and Admiral Lacaze as Minister of Marine.

a small force of battleships and destroyers would be able to reach the Marmara, that they would be able to cut the Turkish communications with the capital, and that the capture of the Gallipoli peninsula would then be assured. He claimed that this opinion was shared by several senior officers and all the members of Admiral de Robeck's staff.

Admiral de Robeck was personally opposed to another naval attempt to force the Straits. He held that it would achieve no definite object, and would have no effect on the military situation. But on the 18th October he had generously allowed Keyes to return to London to lay his scheme before the Admiralty. If the Admiralty supported de Robeck's views, Keyes could return to his post. If, on the other hand, Keyes's plan was adopted by the Admiralty, de Robeck would ask that some other admiral should be appointed to carry it out.

Keyes reached London on the night of the 28th, the evening before the Government's conference with General Joffre. By the evening of the 30th, both the First Sea Lord and Mr. Balfour, then First Lord of the Admiralty, had been fired by some of his enthusiasm, and the First Sea Lord seemed favourable to the idea. The scheme was obviously hazardous, but it seemed to offer the sole remaining chance of saving the Gallipoli campaign from disaster. Right in front of it, however, stood the promise just given to the French to co-operate at Salonika. This would make it difficult for the Gallipoli army to renew the attack, for all the available reinforcements would now, apparently, be needed for the new Balkan front. Furthermore, nothing could in any case be decided till Sir Charles Monro had submitted his report.

Sir Charles Monro, accompanied by Major-General A. L. Lynden-Bell as Chief of the General Staff, landed at Imbros on the morning of the 28th October, and assumed command of the Expeditionary Force. The special instructions which he carried from Lord Kitchener¹ were definite and precise: his first duty was to report fully and frankly on the military situation in Gallipoli; he was to consider the best means of removing the existing deadlock, and to report as soon as possible whether, from a purely military point of view, it would be better to evacuate the peninsula or to try again to capture it. He was to estimate the probable loss that would be incurred in evacuation and, alternatively, the number of troops that would be required to ensure the opening of the Straits. He was further to state if this number would suffice to keep the Straits open, and how many more would be needed to capture

¹ Appendix 17.

Oct. Constantinople.^c All these estimates were to be made on the alternative assumptions that the Germans did or did not reopen the through line to the Turkish capital.

During the ten days which intervened between Sir Ian Hamilton's departure and his successor's arrival, the General Staff at Imbros had drawn up for Sir Charles Monro a memorandum on the local situation which anticipated and suggested an answer to some of these questions. This memorandum argued that, to attain success, an advance on the Narrows ought to be made on both sides of the Straits, and would require an attacking army of 250,000 men, including ten fresh divisions and plentiful ammunition. Owing to the approach of winter, it would be impossible to stage these operations till the spring, though preparations would have to begin at once.

The memorandum suggested that including heavy drafts to replace five months' winter wastage from casualties and sickness, the total reinforcements required from England before the Straits could be opened by the army would be 400,000 men. To arrange such an attack obviously entailed the holding of all the existing positions throughout the winter. If, however, the Turks received enough ammunition to bombard the Suvla beaches incessantly, the Suvla position would become untenable; even if more guns were sent out for counter-battery work, there were no places to put them in. To make Suvla safe, therefore, the only solution would be to attack along the Kiretch Tepe ridge as soon as possible and gain the Tekke Tepe ridge. This was a feasible operation, but would need two fresh divisions, more howitzers and a plentiful supply of artillery ammunition. The evacuation of the peninsula was also a feasible operation. It would be costly, but less expensive if undertaken voluntarily than if enforced by the Turks at a time of their own choosing. If, therefore, this course was to be adopted, no time should be lost. The first stages could be carried out in safety, but it would be unwise to reckon on a smaller total loss than 50 per cent of the fighting personnel, and 66 per cent of the guns on the peninsula.

As nothing was known at Imbros of the Government's problems in other theatres of war, this memorandum offered no opinion as to which of the two alternative courses—to go or to stay—should be adopted in Gallipoli. The memorandum was read by Sir Charles Monro on the evening after his arrival. Next day he informed the officer who had drawn it up that he agreed with its conclusions, but was sorry that it had not helped him more by "plumping" more definitely in favour of evacuation.

THE ARRIVAL OF SIR CHARLES MCNRO 401

Nevertheless, General Monro's first message to the War Oct. Office, sent off the previous afternoon, the 28th October, had given no hint of any idea of an early evacuation of the peninsula. It encouraged, on the contrary, in Lord Kitchener's mind, a hope that the Expeditionary Force might be saved from that dread alternative, to which Kitchener himself was fundamentally opposed. In this telegram General Monro reported that he had seen the corps commanders that morning, and that the health and fighting morale of their troops were said to be improving steadily. He asked for a number of experienced company commanders to be sent out at once, as those who had recently arrived were very inefficient, and for more material for winter revetting and overhead cover. Finally, he mentioned that he had been very favourably impressed with the physique and high military bearing of an Australian brigade which he had inspected the previous day at Mudros.

This message reached London on the eve of the Government's conference with General Joffre on the subject of Salonika. Its news was fairly encouraging; but it did not give the definite lead which the War Secretary was awaiting. Early next morning, though General Monro had not yet been at his new post for 24 hours, Lord Kitchener impatiently telegraphed:

Please send me as soon as possible your report on the main issue at the Dardanelles, namely, leaving or staying.

This message reached Imbros on the evening of the 29th. Early on the 30th—a bright, summer-like day—the Commander-in-Chief proceeded to the peninsula to see the situation for himself,¹ and visited in quick succession the three British zones at Helles, Anzac and Suvla. Never before had anyone attempted to inspect all three of these widely separated fronts in the course of a single day. But Lord Kitchener was impatient: there was no time to lose.

Fresh from France, with its peaceful harbours and docks, and with trains and motors awaiting the arriving steamer, Monro was not prepared for the scenes which met his gaze as he landed at W Beach. The local conditions to which the Gallipoli army had long since grown accustomed—the open beach, the crazy piers, the lancing of stores by hand from bumping lighters, the strings of kicking mules, the heavy dust, the cramped spaces, the jostling crowds on the narrow beach within range of the enemy's guns—filled him with blank amazement. Arriving later at Anzac Cove, where conditions were still

¹ As his Chief of Staff had sprained his knee the night before, and was unable to go, he was accompanied by Colonel Aspinall.

Oct. more difficult, his wonder only grew. To the staff officer beside him he remarked with a whimsical smile: "It's just like 'Alice in Wonderland, 'curiouser and curiouser'"

Already, however, the sight of W Beach had given him the support he needed to urge evacuation. At each of the three bases he stayed long enough to visit the headquarters offices adjoining the beach and to take on a fleeting glance at the country in the immediate neighbourhood. At each of the three corps headquarters the commanders of the various divisions were waiting to meet him. He saw them all in turn in the corps commander's dugout; and to each in turn he posed the same questions: were their troops physically and morally fit for a sustained effort to capture the enemy's positions? Alternatively, presupposing that no drafts could be sent to them, and that the Turks received strong reinforcements with German heavy guns and ammunition, could they maintain their positions throughout the winter?

To these questions the divisional commanders returned identical replies: in their present state of health the troops could not be counted on for more than 24 hours' sustained offensive effort. In existing circumstances the divisional commanders could promise to hold their positions; but if the Turks received unlimited ammunition, while they themselves received very little—and then invariably followed an eloquent shrug of the shoulders—they could only say they would do their best. From Suvla Bay Monro returned to Imbros. His mind was now made up. The following day he telegraphed home to urge the abandonment of the enterprise, and on the 1st November he arranged with the admiral for the formation of a joint naval and military committee to draw up a scheme for the evacuation of the peninsula.¹

General Monro's telegram of the 31st October to Lord Kitchener must be quoted in full:

After an inspection of the Gallipoli peninsula I have arrived at the following conclusions: The troops on the peninsula—with the exception of the Australian and New Zealand Corps—are not equal to a sustained effort owing to the inexperience of the officers, the want of training of the men, and the depleted condition of many of the units.

We merely hold the fringe of the shore, and are confronted by the Turks in very formidable entrenchments with all the advantages

¹ The officers appointed to this committee, which held its first meeting on 8th November, were Captain F. H. Mitchell, R.N., and Commander Hon. Lionel J. D. Lambart, R.N., representing the navy; Lieut.-Colonel C. F. Aspinall, representing the General Staff; and Colonel G. F. MacMunn, representing the Inspector-General of Communications.

THE ARRIVAL OF SIR CHARLES MONRO 403

of position and power of observation of our movements. The Oct. beaches are exposed to observed artillery fire, and in the restricted area all stores are equally exposed. Action by surprise can no longer be counted on, as the Turks are in considerably stronger force than they were and have had ample time to provide against surprise landings.

Since the flanks of the Turks cannot be attacked, only a frontal attack is possible, and no room is afforded on any of the beaches for the distribution of additional divisions should they be sent. Nor is there sufficient space for the deployment of an adequate force of artillery, the action of which would be impaired by poverty of observation and of good positions for searching or counter-battery effect. Naval guns could only assist to a partial degree. In fact, an attack could only be prosecuted under the disadvantages of a serious lack of depth and of absence of power of surprise, seeing that the Turkish position dominates our line throughout. The uncertainty of the weather might also seriously hinder the landing of reinforcements and regularity in providing the artillery ammunition to the amount which might be required.

I am therefore of opinion that another attempt to carry the Turkish lines would not offer any hope of success. The Turkish positions are being actively strengthened daily. Our information leads to the belief that heavy guns and ammunition are being sent to the peninsula from Constantinople. Consequently, by the time fresh divisions, if available, could arrive, the task of breaking the Turkish lines would be considerably more formidable than even it is at present.

On purely military grounds, therefore, in consequence of the grave daily wastage of officers and men which occurs, and owing to the lack of prospect of being able to drive the Turks from their entrenched lines, I recommend the evacuation of the peninsula.

As to the estimate of the loss which would be involved, I am not at present able to make a definite statement. So much would depend on the degree to which the Turks attacked us during our withdrawal, on how far the re-embarkation could be conducted unobserved, and on weather conditions which prevailed at the time. Admiral de Robeck has been asked to give me an estimate, but does not feel able to make at present a precise statement.

I have no information as to the influence on the situation which would be caused by a complete German communication with Constantinople. We are told that the Germans have taken over the Turkish submarine and air services, and that Turkish machine guns and artillery are being manned by German experts. It would appear certain that even if no German troops are sent to this theatre, ammunition and materials of war will be despatched in quantities which will add greatly to our present difficulties.

I have endeavoured in the expression of my opinion to give full weight to the effect which will be created in the East by our eva-

GALLIPOLI

Oct. tion, and I consider that the force now in the peninsula, or such portions of it as may be able to evacuate, would be more favourably placed in Egypt. This force, before it can be usefully employed, stands much in need of rest, reorganization and training. The corps and divisional commanders have done splendid work in the peninsula, but they do not possess the opportunity or time, as they now stand, to create this force into a reliable fighting machine. Hence I think that loss of prestige caused by withdrawal would be compensated for in a few months by increased fighting efficiency.

I propose leaving here to visit Maxwell in Egypt on Tuesday (2nd November), and will report further on the situation in the Near East after consultation with him. I shall then proceed to Salonika.

Assuming that no important reinforcements could be made available for Gallipoli, there could be no doubt at the end of October 1915—just as there can be no doubt now—that, in view of the exhausted state of the troops, the dreaded approach of winter, and the reported imminent arrival of German guns and munitions, there was no sane alternative, from a military point of view, to immediate evacuation. This was the opinion of nearly every senior officer in the Expeditionary Force, and a contrary view was only held by those who feared the effect of a withdrawal on Moslem opinion in India and Egypt and failed to realize that the loss of prestige from a voluntary evacuation would be far less than if the invading army, as a result of a heavy defeat, were driven into the sea. No one on the peninsula was in a position to question the truth of the assertion that German guns and munitions would be soon arriving in large quantities.¹ No one was contemplating the possibility of another attempt by the fleet to rush the Straits. No one at G.H.Q. was aware that at that very moment the project was under consideration in Whitehall.

In all the circumstances of the case, therefore, so far as they were known to the army in Gallipoli, there was no fault to be found with Sir Charles Monro's bold recommendation. On the contrary, as 2½ months had now passed in heart-breaking indecision since the collapse of the August offensive, as every unit on the peninsula was lamentably short of drafts, and as, in the double event of the enemy obtaining an important reinforcement of German guns and ammunition, and the British

¹ It would appear now that the ability of the Germans to send really large quantities of heavy ammunition to the peninsula was exaggerated in November 1915. Owing to the activity of British submarines, guns and ammunition had to be sent from Constantinople by land, by a very indifferent road. By the time evacuation took place, only four old Austrian heavy howitzers and two medium guns had arrived. Owing to the damage done to their railways by the Serbs, through rail communication between Germany and Turkey was not opened until 15th January 1916.

Government failing to arrive at a definite decision one way or Oct. the other, the situation of the invading army would soon be full of peril, the fact that Monro had thus quickly made up his mind, and had forwarded a report which might compel the Government to act, was a matter for relief and thankfulness.

It can safely be asserted, however, that if Sir Charles Monro could have questioned his subordinate commanders in a different way he would have received a different answer. If he could have told them that the Government were fully prepared to support the campaign to the utmost limits of their power, that fresh divisions were being sent out from France with this object, that some of these divisions could be used to relieve tired divisions on the peninsula, that others could be employed in gaining ground at Suvla, that all units remaining on the peninsula would be filled up with drafts, that plentiful supplies of ammunition would be sent out, that 250 Stokes mortars, with special crews, were being prepared in England for service in Gallipoli, that the capture of the peninsula and the forcing of the Straits were of vital importance to the cause of the Allies, that the existing garrison must be called upon for the utmost endurance till the necessary plans could be completed for a new attack, and that the only alternative was an ignominious and perhaps disastrous withdrawal, it is certain that a new spirit of hope and confidence would at once have appeared on the peninsula, and the word evacuation would not have been heard.

By Lord Kitchener, Sir Charles Monro's report was read with consternation. He had just been told of Keyes's scheme for forcing the Dardanelles, and was clutching with all his might at this alternative. To Monro he immediately telegraphed asking if his corps commanders were also in favour of withdrawal. General Maxwell, he said, had just written from Egypt that the effect of evacuation would be disastrous, "unless of course we 'can knock the Turks elsewhere'". Kitchener asked whether Monro had considered these points, and where the Turks could be engaged elsewhere. Monro was also to send as quickly as possible an estimate of the probable losses in case of evacuation.

On receipt of this message on the evening of the 1st Nov- Nov. ember, Generals Byng and Birdwood were at once ordered to G.H.Q., and General Davies, commanding the VIII Corps, was ill, a staff officer was sent off in a destroyer, with a copy of Monro's telegram, to elicit his views. If Davies disagreed with the Commander-in-Chief's recommendation, he was to give his reasons in writing, and the staff officer was to bring back the reply.. Awakened in the middle of the night to give his opinion

Nov. on this weighty question at a moment's notice, the corps commander wrote, "I agree".¹

A strong south-westerly wind was blowing that night—a reminder of winter's approach. The destroyer H.M.S. *Louis* in Suvla Bay had been blown ashore and wrecked the previous evening, and serious damage done to some of the piers.

Early next morning Generals Byng and Birdwood arrived at G.H.Q. The Commander-in-Chief showed them his recommendation, and told them to state in writing if they agreed or disagreed. He urged them to give their personal opinions without paying heed to his.

General Byng started his answer with the words: "I have had the question of evacuation in my mind since arrival, 2½ months ago". Then, running his pencil through these words, he wrote, without hesitation:

I consider evacuation advisable. As regards Suvla, a voluntary and *not* costly retirement is feasible at the present time. But it seems possible that with German help to the enemy a compulsory and therefore costly retirement may be necessitated.

General Birdwood, fearful of the effect of evacuation on Moslem feeling in India and Egypt, found the question more difficult to answer. At last he wrote:

I agree with General Monro regarding grave disadvantages of our position and extreme difficulty of making any progress. But I consider evacuation of peninsula would be regarded by Turks as complete victory. From Indian experience I fear result on Muhammadan world in India, Egypt and Persia. I therefore am opposed to evacuation.

I consider that if we leave peninsula it is essential that the whole force must immediately be launched against Turkey elsewhere, and I fail to see where this can be done with confident hopes of success. I am averse to withdrawal, which would enable Turkish force here to proceed to Caucasus or Mesopotamia. Landing elsewhere than in Turkey would have the same effect.

I fear that the moral effect on our troops of withdrawal would be very bad, while Turks' moral would proportionately rise.

Season being so late, and bad weather at hand, I think actual

¹ General Davies had no illusions as to the difficulty of making progress at Helles. In a rough appreciation submitted to G.H.Q. on 19th September, he had suggested that even the enemy's front system of trenches could not be captured without the help of four divisions at war strength, in addition to the troops actually holding the line, and that the attack ought not to be launched until the enemy garrison—even those in dug-outs—had been reduced to a state of idiocy by three days' continuous bombardment by a greatly augmented number of heavy, medium and field howitzers. He was not sure that positions could be found for all the guns needed, even if the guns and ammunition could be made available.

THE ARRIVAL OF SIR CHARLES MONRO 407

withdrawal would be fraught with difficulty and danger, as ample Nov. time and continuous fine weather would be essential. All embarkations must be done at night, and only four or five nights a week can now be counted on. The advent of any continuous bad weather after partial withdrawal might result in heavy losses.

Telegraphing these opinions to Lord Kitchener on the afternoon of the 2nd November, General Monro added that, despite General Maxwell's views, his own opinion remained unaltered. He advocated that all the troops evacuated from the peninsula should be sent to Egypt, where they could be rested, trained and brought up to strength, and that an endeavour should henceforth be made to be strong at vital points, and not to fritter away men elsewhere. "My judgment, having these "views", he continued, "is that we should act on the defensive "in Egypt and collect there all available troops (without impairing the operations in France, which I regard as the main "theatre), and strike wherever menaced. I am opposed, therefore, to landings elsewhere or the making of further detachments. I do not think it is appreciated how immensely the difficulties of a landing on a beach have been increased by the introduction of quick-firing artillery, heavy ordnance, and the multiplication of stores needful for maintenance "purposes."

As regards the probable losses involved by evacuation, General Monro estimated the total at between 30 and 40 per cent in personnel and material.

The following morning, 3rd November, having handed back the temporary command of the Expeditionary Force to General Birdwood, Monro proceeded to Egypt to discuss with General Maxwell the situation, which might be created in Egypt and the Arab world by the evacuation of the peninsula.¹

¹ During his voyage to Egypt General Monro telegraphed to G.H.Q. at Imbros, defining the procedure which he wished adopted in the event of evacuation:

"Sir Charles Monro to Colonel Aspinall. C.M.R., 4th Nov. 7 P.M.

"Reference naval and military committee on which you are to represent me, scheme as regards withdrawal of material should be worked out on following assumptions. First, it will probably not be possible to embark guns, etc., except during period in which preliminary arrangements are being made. Second, owing to possibility of operation being temporarily suspended by bad weather at any time, sufficient guns must remain ashore until main embarkation of troops begins, to ensure adequate support against determined attack against which we might have to hold out during, say, a week of bad weather. Third, once main embarkation begins everything must be subordinated to getting off men, and it will probably be impossible to embark any guns, warlike stores or material. Speed will be vital, and the period of re-embarking troops should not exceed 48 hours."

Nov. Meanwhile events of considerable importance had been taking place in England. On the afternoon of the 2nd November Mr. Asquith announced in the House of Commons that the strategic conduct of the war would in future be entrusted to a small War Committee consisting of not less than three and not more than five members of the Cabinet. The Cabinet of 22 ministers, which, as a body, had the ultimate responsibility for questions of policy, would be kept constantly informed of the actions and decisions of the Committee, and in all questions which involved a change or new departure in policy would be consulted before decisive action was taken. The Committee would, however, be clothed with power, if decisions had to be taken at very short notice, to take those decisions and to act on them.

On the same day Lord Kitchener had seen Commodore Keyes, and had been immensely attracted by his scheme for forcing the Straits. Mr. Balfour, First Lord of the Admiralty, was also warming to the idea. To Keyes himself Mr. Balfour had admitted that the Admiralty would probably be prepared to support the scheme "if the army meant business", and that, in view of the new burden cast upon the navy by the Salonika landing, more battleships, destroyers and submarines were being sent out to the Mediterranean Fleet. He added, however, that the army must be ready to take advantage of the navy's move by themselves resuming the attack. Later in the day Lord Kitchener received Monro's second report, and, more opposed than ever to its recommendations, he now determined to press the naval plan and to rescue the Gallipoli army from the apparently great peril of evacuation. His task, however, was immensely complicated by the promise given to the French. There were no fresh troops available to make another attack. And even if troops could be found, there was no shipping to carry them.

The following day, 3rd November, the new War Committee held its first meeting, and considered General Monro's two telegrams and Commodore Keyes's project for forcing the Straits. It was decided that General Monro's advice could not as yet be accepted, and that Lord Kitchener should hurry out to the Mediterranean to report on the situation.

In the small hours of the 4th November an urgent personal telegram from Lord Kitchener arrived for General Birdwood. It was customary at that time for all telegrams to be deciphered by a special cipher officer. This, however, was evidently an exceptional message. Finding that its first two groups of figures represented "Most secret. Decipher yourself", the

THE ARRIVAL OF SIR CHARLES MONRO 409

officer took it to the acting Chief of Staff and asked him what Nov. to do. The staff officer replied that he would carry on. But on finding that the third group spelt "Tell no one", he, too, fought shy of ignoring Lord Kitchener's instructions, and stumbled through the dark to awaken the Commander-in-Chief. General Birdwood, however, was unaccustomed to the cipher, and to save time the message was decoded by his staff.

In this message Lord Kitchener had opened his heart to General Birdwood, who for many years had served on his personal staff. But the military plan it suggested was quite impracticable:

Most Secret. Decipher yourself. Tell no one. . . . You know Monro's report. I leave here to-morrow night to come out to you. Have seen Commodore Keyes, and the Admiralty will, I believe, agree naval attempt to force Straits. We must do what we can to assist them, and I think as soon as ships are in the Marmara we should seize and hold the isthmus so as to supply them if Turks hold out. Examine very carefully best position for landing near marsh at head of Gulf of Xeros, so that we could get a line across at isthmus with slips on both sides. To find troops for this purpose we should have to reduce to lowest possible numbers the men in all the trenches, and perhaps evacuate positions at Suvla. All the best fighting men that could be spared, including your boys from Anzac and reinforcements I can sweep up in Egypt, might be concentrated at Mudros ready for this enterprise. The admiral will probably be changed and Wemyss given command to carry through the naval part of the work. As regards command, you would have the whole force and should carefully select your commanders and troops. . . . Work out plans for this or alternative plans as you may think best. We must do it right this time. I absolutely refuse to sign order for evacuation, which I think would be greatest disaster and would condemn a large percentage of our men to death or imprisonment. Monro will be appointed to command the Salonika force.¹

Not only was Lord Kitchener's suggestion impracticable. His telegram placed General Birdwood, who was merely in acting command during General Monro's absence, in a very invidious position. Birdwood replied that any attempt to land near Bulair could only end in disaster. He added: "I sincerely trust that Monro will remain in command here. He has already established confidence in those who have seen him, and his experience in France, which I lack, will be absolutely invaluable. He will, I know, carry out any orders of the

¹ This message was followed by one from the War Office officially notifying that General Birdwood had been appointed to command the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, and that General Monro was appointed to Salonika.

Nov. "Government better than I can." The soul of loyalty to his absent Commander-in-Chief, he refused to promulgate the War Office order for Monro's supersession till he had had an opportunity of personally urging Lord Kitchener to reverse the decision. Meanwhile the only two officers who had seen the War Office telegram were sworn to secrecy.

In London meanwhile Lord Kitchener had learnt at a midnight interview with Commodore Keyes on the night of the 3rd November that he, too, considered it hopeless to attempt to land at Bulair; and in a letter received that evening from Mr. Balfour he had heard that the naval authorities were already cooling towards Keyes's project. On the afternoon of the 4th, however, at a conference in Mr. Balfour's room, the naval project was again discussed between Lord Kitchener, the First Lord and Keyes; and when Keyes left the room he firmly believed that the attempt to rush the Straits might still be sanctioned. An hour later, however, at a final meeting of ministers before Lord Kitchener left London, it was apparently decided that a naval attack on the Straits could only be sanctioned in co-operation with a new attack by the army. In these circumstances, as no fresh troops were now available to make that attack, Lord Kitchener telegraphed to Birdwood on the evening of the 4th to cancel the message he had sent the previous day. His words were charged with bitter disappointment. "I fear", he said, "the navy may not play up. . . . "The more I look at the problem the less I see my way "through, so you had better very quietly and very secretly "work out any scheme for getting the troops off."

Secrecy was indeed the first essential if evacuation was to have the smallest chance of success. But already there were grave fears that the luckless army on the peninsula would be robbed of even this advantage by indiscretions at home. Ever since the question of abandoning the peninsula had been debated by ministers on the 11th October the matter had been openly discussed in London, and in the latest papers from England the officers charged with devising a plan for that peculiarly delicate operation had read with astonishment and dismay the report of a recent debate in the House of Lords.¹ There, reckless of the additional dangers to which their words were subjecting the lives of the troops, two well-known peers had pressed the Government to announce whether or not they were contemplating the "withdrawal from an "enterprise, the successful completion of which is now hopeless". Later, on the 18th November, at a still more critical

¹ See *The Times*, 15th Oct. 1915.

juncture, one of these two noblemen again returned to the Nov. charge. Speaking in the House of Lords, he stated that it was common knowledge that Sir Charles Monro had reported in favour of withdrawal from the Dardanelles, and asked whether Lord Kitchener had been sent out to give a second opinion, or to carry out the withdrawal. In view of these unfortunate public utterances it may well be imagined that the officers responsible for arranging the evacuation were almost bereft of the hope of averting a massacre on the beaches. Only after the war was it learnt that Germans and Turks alike, unable to take these questions at face value, had regarded them as propaganda to hide the preparations for a further British attack.

Lord Kitchener started for Paris on the night of the 4th November. Next day he learnt to his surprise that the new French Government were strongly of opinion that the peninsula should not be evacuated, and that they were more anxious about the quantity than the quality of the British troops to be sent to Salonika. These opinions aroused in Lord Kitchener's mind a final desperate hope of saving the situation in Gallipoli. If the first two British divisions from France were sent to the Dardanelles, two tired divisions from Suvla or Helles might take their place at Salonika, and it might then be possible, not only to hold the peninsula throughout the winter, but even to attack, and to persuade the Admiralty to co-operate with an attempt to rush the Straits. Thereupon he telegraphed to Birdwood:

I mean to do my very utmost to enable you to hold and improve your position, as I regard evacuation as a frightful disaster which should be avoided at all costs. Think over any plan which would enable us to improve our positions so as to render them . . . secure . . . against increasing artillery fire. I cannot say what troops I can now gather for this, but I much hope to assemble two divisions of regular tried troops—possibly 27th and 28th, a brigade of Gurkhas, and Younghusband's brigade from Egypt.

This message, which reached Birdwood on the 6th November, was followed by a cable next day from the Prime Minister:

You must understand that the Government have not decided for evacuation, and will come to no decision until they know Lord Kitchener's opinion. Meanwhile prepare in the utmost secrecy a complete plan for evacuation if and when it should be decided on.

At home the Admiralty had not given up all idea of attempting to force the Straits if the army renewed the attack. On the

Nov. night of the 5th November Mr. Balfour telegraphed to Admiral de Robeck:

I am sorry but not surprised to hear from Commodore Keyes that you are badly in need of a holiday. Please consider yourself at liberty to take one. Lord Kitchener arrives . . . on Tuesday evening. I think you should see him and discuss situation. He is fully acquainted with Keyes's opinion. . . . In making arrangements for your substitute during your absence, please bear in mind the possibility that an urgent appeal from the army to co-operate with them in a great effort may make it necessary for the fleet to attempt to force the Straits. The admiral left in charge should therefore be capable of organizing this critical operation and should be in full agreement with the policy.

Admiral de Robeck replied that Rear-Admiral Wemyss and all senior officers agreed with his opinion that unless it could be shown that some substantial and definite object could be attained by a portion of the fleet eventually forcing their way into the Marmara, the sacrifice entailed in effecting an entry, and the consequent inability to safeguard the armies in Gallipoli and at Salonika would make the operation a grave error.

In view of his renewed hope of saving the situation in Gallipoli, Lord Kitchener had telegraphed to the Admiralty from Paris, asking that Commodore Keyes should join him at Marseilles, to discuss on the voyage out the scheme for a naval attack. This telegram, however, was not communicated to Keyes, as there did not seem to be any possibility of his reaching Marseilles in time. Keyes travelled out *via* Paris and Italy. In Paris he, too, found Government support for holding on in Gallipoli, and the new Minister of Marine¹ even suggested that six French battleships might be sent to assist in the attack on the Straits. From Naples, however, Keyes's journey was a slow one, and by the time he reached Mudros Lord Kitchener was at last in favour of evacuation. "When you didn't turn up at Marseilles," he said to Keyes afterwards, "I made up my mind that the naval plan was dead."

¹ Admiral Lacaze, whom Keyes had known at Rome when they were both serving as naval attachés.